

Reflection on the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Exodus 22:20-26

1 Thessalonians 1:5C-10

Matthew 22:34-40

I often wonder what new insights are possible with a reading that is so familiar. A reading that we have heard many times. What new insights can emerge. My invitation to you is to hear it again perhaps with a slightly different understanding.

“You shall love the Lord, your God,
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your mind.

This is the greatest and the first commandment.

The second is like it:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.”

Jesus invites us to see the connection between these two commandments and if you notice he does not answer the question by repeating one of the ten commandments. What does this signify? Why not simply say, the most important commandment is the first that thou shall not have other gods before me. Is he providing us with two new commandments?

We see here an illustration of when Jesus says in Matthew 5:17 “ Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

He is inviting us to consider what may not have been evident before when the focus was on following the rule of the law, ensuring that we move beyond the understanding that says that as long as I follow the rules, I will be seen favorably in the eyes of God.

It is an invitation to go deeper than following the rules and moves us into the intent of the commandments or as Jesus states. “the whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.”

I believe that Jesus is guiding us in how to respond to a dilemma that we are confronted with in our lives; how our beliefs in God can see easily become separated from how we interact with others and the world around us. Like the understanding of the old testament, being righteous means we live within our understanding of the rules/commandments. Jesus reminds us that disconnecting our beliefs in God from relationship with others is not a full understanding of our relationship with God.

In other words, this is the deeper purpose of the laws; to love God with our entirety and to love our neighbor as ourselves. These are really two deeper commandments. They go hand in hand with each other.

To illustrate what I mean particularly for Catholics. For example, when we say the Body of Christ; do we mean the consecrated host? Then Is not this group, this church also the “body of Christ”. They are not separate things for they are inseparable from each other for both are truly the Body of Christ.

Putting God central in our lives with all of our heart, soul and mind is connected as the way we relate to others and our world.

I am deeply convinced that Jesus speaks to us in this way to awaken to the fact that we have a tendency to look up vertically when we speak and address God and not how we look horizontally, at those around us. Our love of God becomes manifest in how we enter into relationship with those around us, particularly with those who are marginalized as suggested in the first reading Exodus.

In the first reading we hear the Lord say,

"You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry."

It is a call to focus on how we treat others and reads like the laws of do's and don'ts. You can read these words and decide to follow the rules and welcome the alien and not do wrong to the widow or orphan and then feel we are pleasing in the eyes of God. As some of you may know, I was the alien, the immigrant who was welcomed into this country. It is something for which I am deeply grateful.

The invitation from Jesus in the Gospel reading is to go deeper to move from just taking care of those who are marginalized and enter into relationship with the "alien, with the widow and the orphan" to see and discover God in the other.

What does it mean to enter into relationship and not just stay at the level of caring for others; moving away from doing for others to being with others?

If we really do discover God in the other, then we are moved to be in relationship with them and to develop the truth that I am like the other; that I too was an alien at one time and counted on others to welcome me. This is a reminder and call for us to remember to open our hearts and homes to others, to those we can call "aliens".

Again, there is an inherent struggle that we need to live with when reflecting on our tendency to see God as a series of commandments as focusing solely on this can lead us to disconnect from others.

A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to work with the Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops and was quite struck by what I was noticing in the discussions. It was the way we spoke of God and the Church. There were a number of participants who were very concerned about protecting the Catholic faith and were quite focused on ensuring that the teachings of the Church were clearly understood and followed by all Catholics. These tended to be people in positions of authority in the church. It was not limited to those only in authority, but a number of people felt that being firm in our beliefs was the only way we could protect and promote our faith, the danger of becoming too secularized. There were others who I would label practitioners who worked in ministries in Canada and around the globe. They tended to be focused on building relationships with those they ministered to, seeing as they often stated, "Jesus" in the eyes of the marginalized.

As I listened closely to them, I realized that one of the important insights that they pointed to, is that when we risk to be in relationship with our neighbor and those who are marginalized, we become transformed. This transformation is both at the level of the heart and head; how I understand and live out my faith is built on the more profound interpretation of the commandments proposed by Jesus.

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What is this transformation that emerges when I find the courage to love God and my neighbor. In relationship we both discover our common humanity. That we are intrinsically connected to each other, that the other is "just like me".

This is such a simple statement yet has profound consequences. When I see and recognize that you are just like me, my heart can be full of compassion, knowing that your hurts, hopes and desires are also reflected in my heart. You are not an "alien", but rather you are what I know to be true in my heart, a fellow passenger on this journey together, trying to make sense of your life.

I also discover that I can learn so much from you, about seeing the world with new eyes. I learn about God through you.

I discovered this living in L'Arche. I learned that some of the most welcoming and non-judgemental people I have ever met were those who we say have a "disability". The person with a disability became my master teaching me the unconditional acceptance of God of the "other".

I have learned being in the North, seeing through the eyes of another, the love of land of space and adopted a heart full of gratefulness for the beauty that surrounds us. I have also learned that we cannot separate our love of our neighbor from the love of our land. I am slowly learning what it means to be in relationship with nature.

I have also learned about the deeper meaning of our lives by being with family and friends who are dying and have died. I am just like them, I am learning to prepare myself for that moment and deeply grateful for how they have prepared the way for me.

In closing, my love of God is manifested in the way I enter into relationship and love others and my relationships with others is deeply connected to my love of God. They are inseparable

and to echo Jesus's words again

You shall love the Lord, your God,
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your mind.
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

In prayer and gratitude,

Raphael Amato

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